

CACTUS PARK

(ZONE 3)

The place names of note in the area are Ninemile Hill, Cactus Park, Farmer's Canyon, Gunnison Bluffs, Gibbler Mountain.

Geography

Description:

- Zone 3 is bordered by East Creek and the Unaweep Canyon to the northwest, the Gunnison River to the northeast, the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness to the southeast and the Uncompahgre National Forest to the southwest.
- Elevation ranges from 4,625-feet in the Gunnison Bluffs, up to 8,100-feet near the Uncompahgre National Forest. Gibbler Mountain is 7,628 feet high in elevation.
- Geologic formations, from the Gunnison Bluffs and southwestward, run from the Salt Wash and Brushy Basin to the Dakota/Burro Canyon, then alluvial deposits around Cactus Park Road.
- Gibbler Mountain has the above formations, plus Summerville/Entrada on southwestern slopes. The southern half of Zone 3 is predominately the Wingate formation.
- At one time, the Gunnison River may have run through the canyon, only to be blocked by an uplift.

Management Concerns: None

Paleontology

Description:

- Zone 3 is considered to be fairly rich in fossils.
 - The skull of an Ankylosaurid --an armored type of dinosaur -- was found here last spring and received widespread news coverage

Management Concerns

- Should the BLM allocate any paleontology sites for public use/interpretation?
 - If so, how should this be done without disturbing ongoing paleontology research?
- Looting of paleontology sites has been identified as an issue in this area by BLM law enforcement

Water

Description:

- Only perennial stream in this zone is a segment of Big Dominguez Creek (East Creek is outside of the NCA)
- Ephemeral streams drain the Gunnison Bluffs directly into the Gunnison River
- The intermittent Gibbler Gulch and Farmers Canyon drain into East Creek. Riparian areas are associated with Big Dominguez, Gibbler Gulch Creek and Jack's Canyon Creek.

- There are seeps and springs in the southeast corner of Zone 3, near the headwaters of Big Dominguez Creek.

Management Concerns: None

Vegetation & Soils

Description:

- Vegetation cover in Zone 3:
 - Desert Shrub: 0.5%
 - Mountain Shrub: 9.2%
 - Pinyon-Juniper Woodlands: 62.7%
 - Sagebrush Shrublands: 25.9%
 - Ponderosa Pine: 1.4%
 - Riparian: 0.4%
- BLM sensitive plants located in this zone include the Colorado hookless cactus (federally endangered) and the Grand Junction and Naturita milkvetch (BLM sensitive)
- 89% of the zone is currently meeting land health standards
- The area has been intensively managed for livestock since the later 1960s
 - Water developments
 - Trails and fences
 - Vegetation treatments
 - Many of these mechanical treatments were followed with seeding using crested wheatgrass, an exotic grass with high palatability for livestock

Management Concerns

- The following problems are associated with parts of this zone
 - Loss of native plants/ predominance of exotic plants, particularly crested wheatgrass, cheat grass and Russian knapweed
 - This has been the result of:
 - Livestock grazing (particularly in areas of livestock concentration)
 - Vegetation treatments
 - Drought
 - Road and trail proliferation
 - Encroachment of pinyon-juniper into sagebrush parks
 - This has been the result of:
 - Fire suppression
 - Livestock grazing
 - Low plant biodiversity
 - This has been the result of:
 - Livestock grazing
 - Drought
 - Vegetation treatments
 - Accelerated soil erosion
 - This has been the result of:
 - Livestock grazing
 - Vegetation treatments

- Fire suppression
- Habitat fragmentation
 - This has been the result of:
 - Road and trail proliferation

Livestock Grazing

Description:

- The entire zone falls into the Gibbler Common allotment
 - Exception is the upper end of Big Dominguez Creek, which falls into the Wagon Park allotment
 - Both Gibbler Common and Wagon Park allotments are permitted for cattle
- Gibbler Common allotment includes 6 pastures
 - 3 are used during the spring
 - 3 are used during the fall/winter

Management Concerns:

- Managing livestock grazing to meet land health standards and objectives for biological resources (see vegetation and soils section)
- Ensuring that livestock developments are maintained in a weed-free state

Wildlife

Description:

- BLM Sensitive Species in Zone 3 (c = confirmed, p = potential habitat)
 - Gunnison sage grouse (c)
 - Desert bighorn sheep (c)
 - Northern goshawk (P)
 - Bats (Allen's big-eared bat, Big free-tailed bat, Spotted bat, Townsend's big-eared bat, Fringed myotis) (P)
 - Midget-faded rattlesnake (P)
 - Milk snake (P)
 - Columbian sharp-tailed grouse (P)
 - Brewer's sparrow (P)
- Zone 3 also provides habitat for deer and elk, and is used during the fall/winter for hunting

Management Concerns:

- Habitat fragmentation from road/trail proliferation and increased use
- Habitat quality issues (see vegetation and soils section)

Cultural Resources

Description:

- Cultural surveys across Highway 141 in Bangs Canyon and in Farmer's Canyon in Zone 3 have found a very high density of cultural sites
 - This is likely the case throughout Zone 3
- The Cactus Park zone contains Ute wickiups, culturally modified trees, deeply buried significant sites and rock art.

Management Concerns:

- Vandalism and looting is a problem
- How can the BLM protect cultural sites in Cactus Park while providing recreational experiences that the public desires?

Recreation

Description:

- 50,000 visitors use this zone annually, approximately half of all recreation use in the NCA.
- Zone 3 is readily accessible from the greater Grand Junction area and is a popular area for the following activities:
 - OHV use
 - Scoping and recreation focus groups suggest that many members of the public would like to see the Cactus Park/Ninemile Hill area become an OHV emphasis area.
 - Cactus Park has a high density of OHV trails. Most trails were user-created and have sustainability issues.
 - Ninemile Hill, Cactus Park and Farmers Canyon are used primarily for OHV trail-riding recreation, with connections to additional trails on adjacent US Forest Service land.
 - Ninemile Hill is also popular for motorcycle trials riding.
 - Construction of the new staging area at Cactus Park seems to have led to increased OHV use in Zone 3
 - Horseback riders and hikers
 - Equestrians and hikers enjoy the Cactus Park trails and trailheads that gives access to the Dominguez Wilderness.
 - Public scoping comments suggested that some members of the public would like the BLM provide additional quiet recreation opportunities in this zone.
 - Mountain biking
 - The Tabeguache Trail is 144-miles long and connects Montrose with Grand Junction -- runs through Cactus Park.
 - Public scoping identified the following:
 - The mountain biking community would like a new single-track trail system in Cactus Park, Gunnison Bluffs and Gibbler Mountain areas
 - The emphasis would be on making the trails mechanized/pedestrian/equestrian, but some of these trails could be multiple-use motorized/mechanized/foot trails
 - The mountain biking community would like to see an SRMA-type management approach for mountain biking in this zone
 - Camping
 - The majority of camping the Zone 3 is in dispersed, undesignated camp sites. There are probably hundreds of dispersed campsites throughout Zone 3
 - Dispersed camping is often associated with hunting, OHV riding, wildlife viewing and hiking
 - Dominguez Campground is a popular site, featuring a rest-room, campsites, picnic tables and a trailhead for hikers and equestrians who want to venture down the Big Dominguez Canyon.

- The BLM received public comments during scoping that suggested that some members of the public would like to see designated campsites, while others prefer the dispersed camping that is currently available
- Rock climbing
 - Bouldering & multi-pitch climbing -- East Creek / Hwy 141.
 - Bouldering -- sandstone blocks along lower East Creek.
 - Multi-pitch climbs -- East Creek in Unaweep Canyon.
- Hunting
 - The higher elevations of Zone 3 are popular with big game hunters, particularly elk and deer hunters
 - Almost the entire NCA falls into Game Management Unit 62
 - Hunting season for big game varies each year but it generally begins in the end of August and lasts through November, with late season elk hunting extending through December
- Auto Touring
 - Highway 141 bounds the northwest side of the NCA. It is the first leg of a scenic byway that sweeps south and then southeast, through Gateway, Naturita, Norwood and Placerville.

Management Concerns

- Should the BLM consider making a major commitment to recreation in this zone? If so, for what type of recreational experience and for what type of users?
- What should a full range of alternatives that balances recreation and resource protection in this zone include?
- How should the BLM manage the competing recreational interests in this zone to minimize conflict?
- How should the BLM ensure that resources are protected while making a commitment to recreation?

Travel Management

Description

- There is a large range in the route density in Zone 3
 - Highest density is the Front Country, near the main Cactus Park road and the old flagstone quarries.
 - Lowest density areas are:
 - Gunnison Bluffs
 - Gibbler Mountain
 - Gibbler Gulch
- Why were the roads built:
 - Livestock grazing
 - Mining
 - Paleontological exploration
 - Flagstone quarry
 - Fuel wood harvesting
 - Recreation user-created

Management Concerns

- The areas with exceptionally high road/trail densities create problems for wildlife, vegetation (roads bring weeds), cultural resources and recreation
- Any roads/trails designated under this plan will need to be surveyed for cultural and biological resources, which can be costly
- The areas with low road/trail densities would allow for the construction of new trails, however, these core areas are important for wildlife and vegetation

Wilderness Characteristics Outside of Designated Wilderness

Policy Context:

- The BLM is required to update its inventory of lands with wilderness characteristics in its RMPs
- This applies to lands that are outside of wilderness study areas and federally designated wilderness
- Once the BLM finds lands with wilderness characteristics, the BLM is not mandated to protect those wilderness characteristics
- BLM staff is still in the process of updating the inventory in the D-E NCA
- The criteria for inventorying lands with wilderness characteristics is still in flux for the BLM

Description:

- There is one area within Zone 3 that has been identified by the public in a citizen's wilderness proposal and in public scoping comments
 - Gunnison Bluffs/Dominguez North

Management Concerns:

- If the BLM determines that Gunnison Bluffs/Dominguez North has wilderness characteristics, what range of alternatives should the BLM analyze for protection of that area?

Law Enforcement

Description

- BLM law enforcement frequents this zone of the NCA

Management Concerns:

- Looting, particularly of paleontological sites has been a problem in the past
- Squatters have been an intermittent problem in Zone 3
- Off-road travel by OHVs has been a problem